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ABSTRACT

The paper draws on the experiences of a mainstreamed early education program to consider ways that preschool programs can make themselves accessible to families with handicapped children. The importance of clearly stated program intent is stressed along with accurate staff perceptions of handicapping conditions. Ten steps are then offered: (1) describing what the program offers; (2) determining what the parents need; (3) restating program services; (4) matching family needs and available services; (5) negotiating; (6) deciding on services; (7) confirming and following through on agreements; (8) preparing staff and children; (9) examining the classroom environment for needed modifications; and (10) providing ongoing support. (CL)

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GENERIC PRESCHOOL IN THE COMMUNITY:

STEP BY STEP INCLUSION OF CHILDREN

WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Linda L. Gil MA
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NORTHWEST CENTER
CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

GENERIC PRESCHOOLS IN THE COMMUNITY : Step-by-Step Inclusion of Children with Special Needs

Linda Gil and KarenSue Wend

INTRODUCTION

The topical issue discussed in this paper will have as a focus the systems, methods and strategies that need to be considered and implemented when generic early childhood education programs mainstream young children with handicapping conditions. The discussion will focus on the needs of the children, staff and parents. The needs of the three groups within the context of the early childhood program will be examined. Philosophical considerations and practical strategies will be outlined for the reader. As well, the considerations and perspectives will be discussed from the viewpoint of the literature and Northwest Center Child Development Program.

Northwest Center has operated as an early childhood education program, integrating both normally developing children and those with special needs for a period of six years. The issues faced and resolved by the program staff in the Child Development Program have proved to be valuable information for other early childhood programs, whether they are specialized programs or generic child care or preschool programs.

For purposes of this paper, the focus will be on children under the age of five years, with handicapping conditions, served or not served by school districts, who are seeking local early childhood educational programs, child care or preschool services.

Philosophical Considerations

When working with programs which primarily provide services for normally developing children, but which are interested in making those services available to children with handicapping conditions, the first question asked by anyone is "why do we want to do this?"

The second question is usually "isn't it just as beneficial to the child with special needs to be receiving services in a specialized program?" An answer to both questions can be found in the changing view of our society to the person with special needs. Historically such a person has been segregated from the mainstream for a variety of reasons, usually having less to do with the persons' handicapping condition and more to do with the perceptions of the majority of people with whom the person comes in contact. With new laws governing the rights of disabled persons coming into effect in more recent years, the question of segregated or integrated services continues to be an area for resolution

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An answer to both questions then, can be that "we" (e.g. society) want to do this because the perceptions of our society in general have changed to the point of questioning why we segregate the members of our society, particularly children, from usual services which all members of society might benefit. This is particularly true for the parents of children with special needs who might need child care, preschool experiences and other usual early childhood experinces for their child with handicapping conditions, or special needs. Families might need specialized services (e.g. therapies, medical care) for their child, but as well need the usual services (e.g. day care). For many families, the usual services have been just as difficult to obtain as the specialized services.

Answers to the two questions posed might be that preschool services need to be available to parents who have children with handicapping conditions because they need them and the parents need to decide whether or not their child would be best served by more isolated or more integrated services. The answer might be in the accessability to what exists, rather than in the availability. Both accessability and availability pose problems, but the first term can be the most difficult for families.

SYSTEMS, METHODS AND STRATEGIES

Systems: The Program

A program offering services such as day care, preschool, nursery school, or early childhood education of any particular theoritical perspective for children and their parents will want to have a clearly outlined statement of the services offered.

The first step, then, is for an early childhood program to describe what it offers, so that prospective participants can match their needs with what is offered. For example, the program might have in writing, " this program provides child care and early education experiences for children, ages (blank) through (blank), with a ratio of one teacher to every five children, and group sizes no larger that ten. This program is able to accomodate children with unique needs, provided the parents and staff have agreed on any support the child might need from sources outside the program and arrangements have been made to secure such services."

When there is a clearly stated program intent, parents are better able to make decisions about whether or not the program meets the needs of their child. The program staff is clear about what they can and cannot do with and without appropriate support services.

A second important issue for programs to consider and resolve is for the staff to have accurate perceptions regarding handicapping conditions. The experience of the program staff at Northwest Center over the years, is that staff people, as well as society in general, continue to perceive handicapping conditions as a "severe physical disorder", or more interestingly, a condition one can "see."

Understanding that a handicapping condition, particularly for a child, can be a delay in communication development, or a delay in motor development, or a delay in any other area of development is important. A handicapping condition can be a condition that delays the child's development for a period of time and the delay can change if appropriate intervention is used, or a condition (e.g. birth defect, chronic disorder, syndrome) that retards the childs development. In any event, the child has special needs, but more importantly has the need to experience life just as any other child would. A handicapping condition, or special need, is a part of the scope of needs any parent has to consider when deciding what services (e.g. day care, preschool) in the community she/he might want for her/his child.

For the program staff and management, understanding and clearly stating what the program offers, understanding what is a handicapping condition and what that means for the child in the program, makes the match between parent, child and program much more comfortable and the decision regarding services easier to make.

METHODS: The Children and How to Provide Services

Once a program has determined what services it best can offer and is comfortable with it's program philosophy and description of services, then the focus can turn to the child and family.

For example, a family seeks day care in a community day care center. The family has a child with a birth defect and that defect has resulted in the child being slower to walk, talk, and be socially competent at a level other children might be at the same age. The family knows this about the child and has been receiving specialized outpatient services and therapies through a local hospital. Now the family, which is headed by a single parent, needs day care because the parent needs to return to work.

The parent decides this child care facility best suits her needs and thinks it will be the best situation for her child. She comes to interview with the staff at " Community Day Care."

The following strategies are part of the method of addressing the issue for Community Day Care:

FIRST STEP: WHAT PROGRAM OFFERS

1. Staff person describes services to parent, complete with philosophy, ages of children, educational program, expectations of involvement of all families, etc.

SECOND STEP: WHAT FAMILY NEEDS

2. Staff person determines from parent what is needed for the child (day care, therapies, special diet,etc.).

THIRD STEP: CLEAR STATEMENT OF WHAT PROGRAM CAN OFFER

3. Staff person states what the program can offer (full day child care).

FOURTH STEP: HOW PROGRAM MATCHES FAMILY NEEDS AND AVAILABLE SERVICES

4. Staff person states that the program has a resource file that includes where to get specialized services (e.g. occupational therapy from an Elks Club therapist, private health insurance pays for a therapist to provide therapy in the child care setting, specialized services available in local school district for 2 hours a day, etc.).

FIFTH STEP: NEGOTIATION

5. Parent states that she thinks her child is eligible for local school district services because of her child's chronological age and will investigate how those services will be available to her child. Staff person and parent agree that there are community resources available so that some staff training can be provided the Child Care staff, regarding the handicapping condition and implications for placement in the classroom. Tasks for each are outlined in a plan that goes into the child's file, with both parent and staff person agreeing on a time line to bring back the information.

SIXTH STEP: DECISION

6. Staff person of Community Day Care states that the parent's child will be able to come into the program for full day care, with the understanding that there are no special services for the child in the child care program. Each agrees to assume responsiblility for obtaining the necessary resources (e.g. staff person obtains staff training, parent makes necessary arrangements for support services).

SEVENTH STEP: CONFIRMATION

7. Just as with any agreement between program staff and family when a child enters a child care or community preschool, the components of this agreement are written and placed in the child's file. The critical element of this seventh step is follow-through. Potential problems can be diminished or eliminated by simple "follow-through" with what each person agrees to do.

EIGHTH STEP: PREPARATION

8. The responsible staff person prepares the staff for the entry of a new child, just as would be done with any entering child. Special considerations will be given to communicating necessary information about the child's handicapping condition to the teacher. The teacher and responsible staff person determine what information needs to be shared with other children, depending on their level of development. Special information might be shared with parents of the children in the child's classroom. The purpose of the sharing would be to matter of factly and directly state that," (Child's name) will be coming into our classroom. He has a special condition and therefore needs help with walking, communication and feeding. You might notice the likenesses and differences with (child's name) from your child, and we want you to know it's alright with "child's name" parent to ask about them. We welcome (child's name) into our program."

NINTH STEP: THE CLASSROOM SETTING

9. A final step is perusing the classroom environment and determing what, if anything, needs to be considered, changed or altered to accomodate the child. This is not a different step, if one considers that any child entering a classroom needs the same consideration.

Thinking through the classroom setting, the needs of each individual child in the classroom, the goals of the curriculum and what the teacher is presenting each day for each child, as well as the group, makes the task of including a child with different or special needs, a usual consideration of the classroom teacher.

TENTH STEP: PROVIDING ONGOING SUPPORT

10. This step is crucial. Support from program administration for the staff person working with the child with special needs must be offered in the form of inservice training. Support for all parents must be offered in the form of parent information. Support for the parent of the child with special needs must be offered through open lines of communication and occur weekly, if not daily, between staff persons and parents.

Support for the child must come in the form of continued intervention services offered by appropriate community professionals. Though these services can be difficult to obtain and coordinate, thoughtful and continued efforts by the staff and parents can diminish and erase the barriers to smooth and coordinated services and be a support to parents, child and staff.

CONCLUSIONS

The methods and strategies described in this paper form the basis for systematic inclusion of children with handicapping conditions into generic early education programs. An important piece of information to consider is that the ten steps outlined are probably steps that need to be considered before any child comes into a program. If the ten steps were always considered, misunderstandings and problems would probably be diminished considerably!

For more information regarding mainstreaming children with special needs, the topical papers that appear in the reference section of this paper might prove to be useful. Though there is still a myriad of unresolved issues and new strategies need to be developed for the issues raised by staff persons, particularly teachers, these basic ten steps have been found to be be a good basis for mainstreaming in generic community early childhood programs.

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